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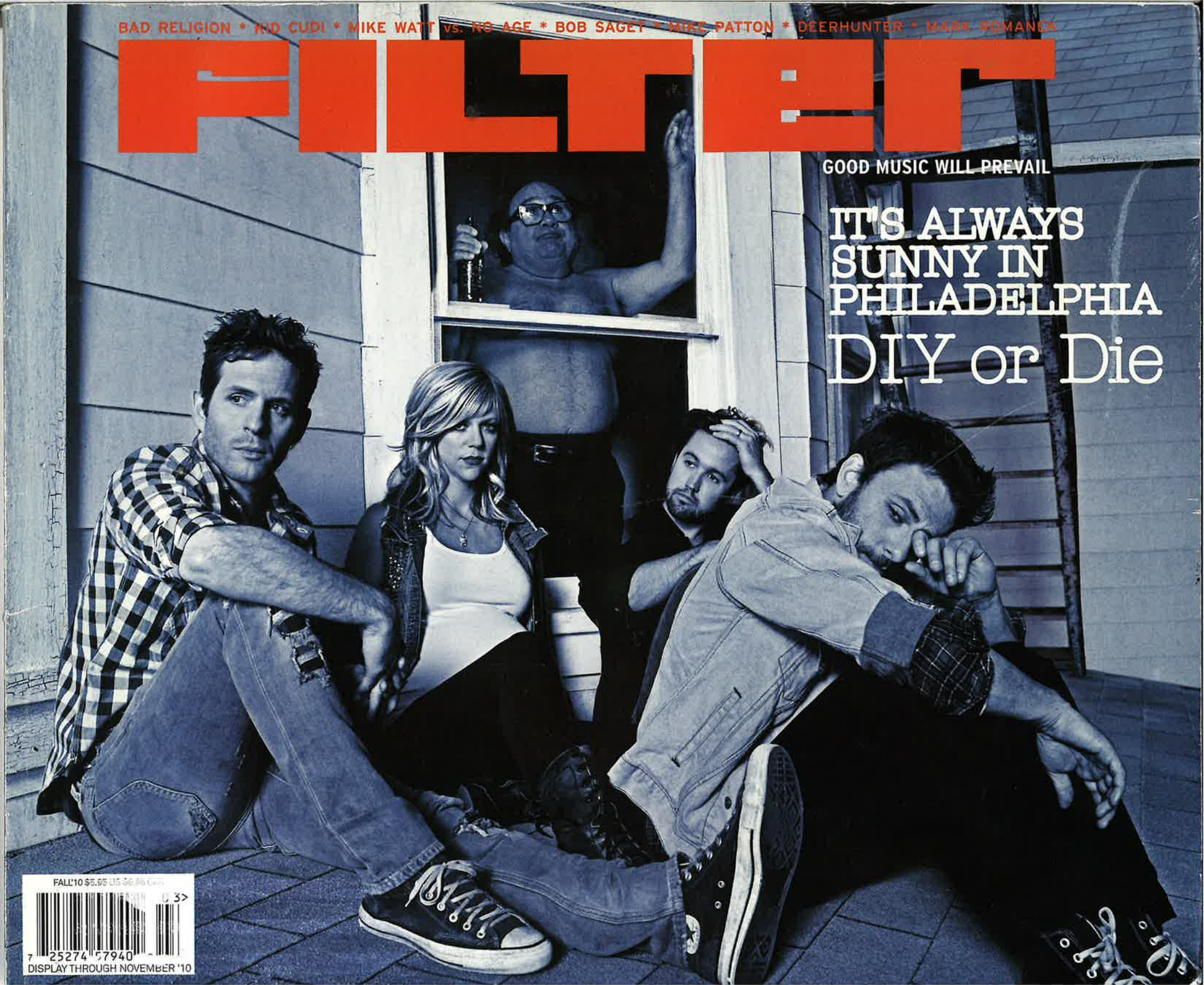
FILTER

GOOD MUSIC WILL PREVAIL

IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA

DIY or Die



FALL'10 $5.95 US
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ON THE COVER AND ABOVE: The cast of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* photographed in Los Angeles by Brantley Gutierrez

A Handful of Friends

The Punk TV of It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia

By Kyle Lemmon
Photos by Brantley Gutierrez

"Big town's got its losers/small town's got its vices/a handful of friends/one needs a match, one needs some ice"
–"Answering Machine" by The Replacements

The rumbling applause fills every spare corner of San Francisco's Nob Hill Masonic Auditorium and hits like a kick drum as punchlines obliterate funny bones into tiny ivory splinters. The stage looks like a cross between a ragtag school play and a hallucinogenic children's show. A troll asks for a "toll to get into that boy's hole" as something or somebody called the "Nightman" pays a visit to said boy's bedchamber. As the hero transforms into his true identity, the crowd goes equally bat-shit. A man in an ass-tight, electric green Lycra bodysuit rushes the stage and an enthusiastic female fan follows suit, her left breast plopping out of her top as she darts forward into the madness of the Dayman.

The enthused gathering of geeky indie kids, hulking frat dudes and dressed-up hooligans shouts out lyrics and snatches of dialogue before the actors can utter them. You'd think a bedraggled rock band was pounding away on a power chord-riddled anthem, but in fact it's the cast of the FX television series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* performing its hilarious "The Nightman Cometh" episode to yet another capacity crowd. Previously kept afloat by a steady but modest groundswell of support from American twenty-somethings, this string of small-screen-comedy-come-to-life gigs quickly sold out through blog-aided word of mouth and helped blast this odd little gem of a show into a new level of fandom, weirdness and insane hilarity rarely enjoyed by a TV program built from such humble beginnings.

The beloved "Nightman" episode centers on a highly illiterate, animal-loving man-child named Charlie who creates a musical based on a song he composed with his narcissistic friend Dennis after a glue-huffing episode. This kind of milk-snorting (or *something*-snorting) stuff only the best comedians attempt, let alone pull-off. The hilariously base series—once tagged as "*Seinfeld* on crack"—centers on five degenerates who own (and somehow manage to keep) a local watering hole called Paddy's Pub. This oily, Irish armpit of drinking in South Philadelphia is home to "The Gang"—Charlie Kelly (Charlie Day), self-described badass karate master Mac (Rob McElhenney), womanizer Dennis Reynolds (Glenn Howerton), the interminably hapless Deandra "Sweet Dee" Reynolds (Kaitlin Olson) and the dirty-old-man father-figure Frank Reynolds (Danny DeVito). The cast members admit that their characters are "heightened portrayals" of themselves and they certainly live up to that haughty description on-screen. From hosting a wet T-shirt contest involving a minor to Russian roulette gambling to poisoning frat boys to banging each other's moms, *Sunny* tweaks the social mores seen on *Arrested Development*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *The Office* and dials them up to ludicrous levels, leaving the viewer giddily cheering the heroes even further into the lunatic fray.

The idiotic shit that The Gang gets into on a weekly basis stems from the absolute freedom show creators/executive producers/directors/actors/writers/editors McElhenney, Day and Howerton are given by their network. Like an indie rock band assuming control of its destiny by creating its own label, so do RCG (Rob, Charlie, and Glenn) call their own shots. The *Sunny* creators wanted the show's comedy to be character-based and credible. "We didn't want to make *jokes* per se," Howerton says. "We wanted the humor to come from a more grounded and real place, with high stakes and real scenarios, even if it was taboo."

"They're not afraid, and it's a good thing. Why be timid or walk on eggshells? These guys are a bunch of nipple-tweakers," DeVito says of his castmates. "The first time they pulled that on set, I told 'em, 'If you pulled that shit in New Jersey you would get a chair smashed over your head!'"

Pleased to Meet Me

According to the creative trio, the legendary pilot episode, filmed on a camcorder for $75, that planted the seed for the show was slightly different from its current iteration. "It was called *It's Always Sunny on TV* and followed friends trying to get acting jobs in L.A.," Day says. "We shot a short about Glenn visiting my apartment to borrow some sugar and not really caring that I have cancer." This simple plot would lead to huge opportunities.

Before 2005, McElhenney, Day and Howerton were struggling thespians in New York and L.A., scraping together the money and gumption to pitch big networks on their idea. "When we hung out back then we were usually reading scripts that Rob had written," Day says, "where someone usually ended up being bashed by a hammer at the end." Described as *A Beautiful Mind*-like, self-imposed exile replete with current event note cards being bandied about the room, this rigorous brainstorming routine is still practiced today when the trio breaks story ideas for new episodes, often ending much in the same way as those early scripts. "Sometimes we're banging our heads against the wall," Day says.

But, as FX's gamble has proved, when The Gang emerges from writers' exile, its results are unmatched. Originally seen as a "comedy island" on the network, the show found its niche when John Landgraf, FX's President and General Manager and former Jersey Films partner of DeVito's, suggested to move *Sunny* to a blue-collar setting. The idea rang true with the Philadelphia-native McElhenney's long history of mundane day jobs at construction sites, bars and filing companies. The self-proclaimed "liaison between the network and creative staff," McElhenney loves his dream job in light of his former life. "I come from modest means," he reflects, "but my parents worked several jobs to put me and my brothers and sisters into the best schools." When asked what he would be doing if *Sunny* never aired, McElhenney summons the badass tone of Mac when he replies, matter-of-factly, "writing another TV show."

It's this DIY attitude that bolsters the rest of the cast as well. The physical comedian of Paddy's Pub, Day grew up a baseball player in Middletown, Rhode Island, before nabbing a dramatic role on NBC's *Third Watch*. He soon turned to comedy with FOX's *Luis* and Comedy Central's *Reno 911!*, and now Day splits time between *Sunny* and roles in Hollywood comedies. Even though his *Sunny* character once misread a door marked "Private" as "Pirate," the real-life Charlie's co-stars remark about his smart writing and musical knowledge, the latter being showcased hilariously on "The Nightman Cometh" U.S. theater tour.

Olson, now married to McElhenney and, at the time of press, pregnant with their first child, grew up in Tigard, Oregon, and graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in Theatre Arts. "I grew up on six acres and my parents were hippies," she says. "We had a giant garden and if you were hungry you just went out and found a ripe carrot. I lived a very different life from my friends and I always loved acting, but I only did it during summer camp because I was shy." Olson began her comedy career with Los Angeles' Groundlings, a competitive training ground for many successful comics which she credits with perfecting her strong work ethic.

The son of a decorated fighter pilot, Howerton earned a B.A. from Juilliard's Actor Training program only after getting a scholarship to attend Miami's New World School of the Arts. "They teach you a lot of technique there, so it's easy to become a little robotic," he says. "It was great to let go of all that for *Sunny*." Despite his Shakespearean background and dramatic TV and film roles, Howerton loves playing Dennis, a character known to trick his sister into using crack cocaine and steroids, as well as the improvisation-friendly vibe

on set. "What surprised me was how we all took to the improv aspect of the show," Howerton says. "Kaitlin had that background, but the rest of us didn't. Although, I think lot of people assumed we were this comedy troupe at first."

If *Sunny* was indeed a troupe, the marquee name would of course be that of the legendary DeVito. It's rumored that the film veteran was brought on by Landgraf to boost flagging ratings, but no matter the reason for his introduction, DeVito's return to a prominent television role after almost 25 years since *Taxi* ushered The Gang's antics into new living rooms. DeVito's portrayal of Frank Reynolds as a mucky, low-life patriarch is far from a Heathcliff Huxtable or even an Al Bundy, and the actor started lampooning right from the start. Just before the cameras rolled on his very first scene, DeVito sneaked a peek at Olson's breasts. "We knew right away he was perfect for the role," Olson says.

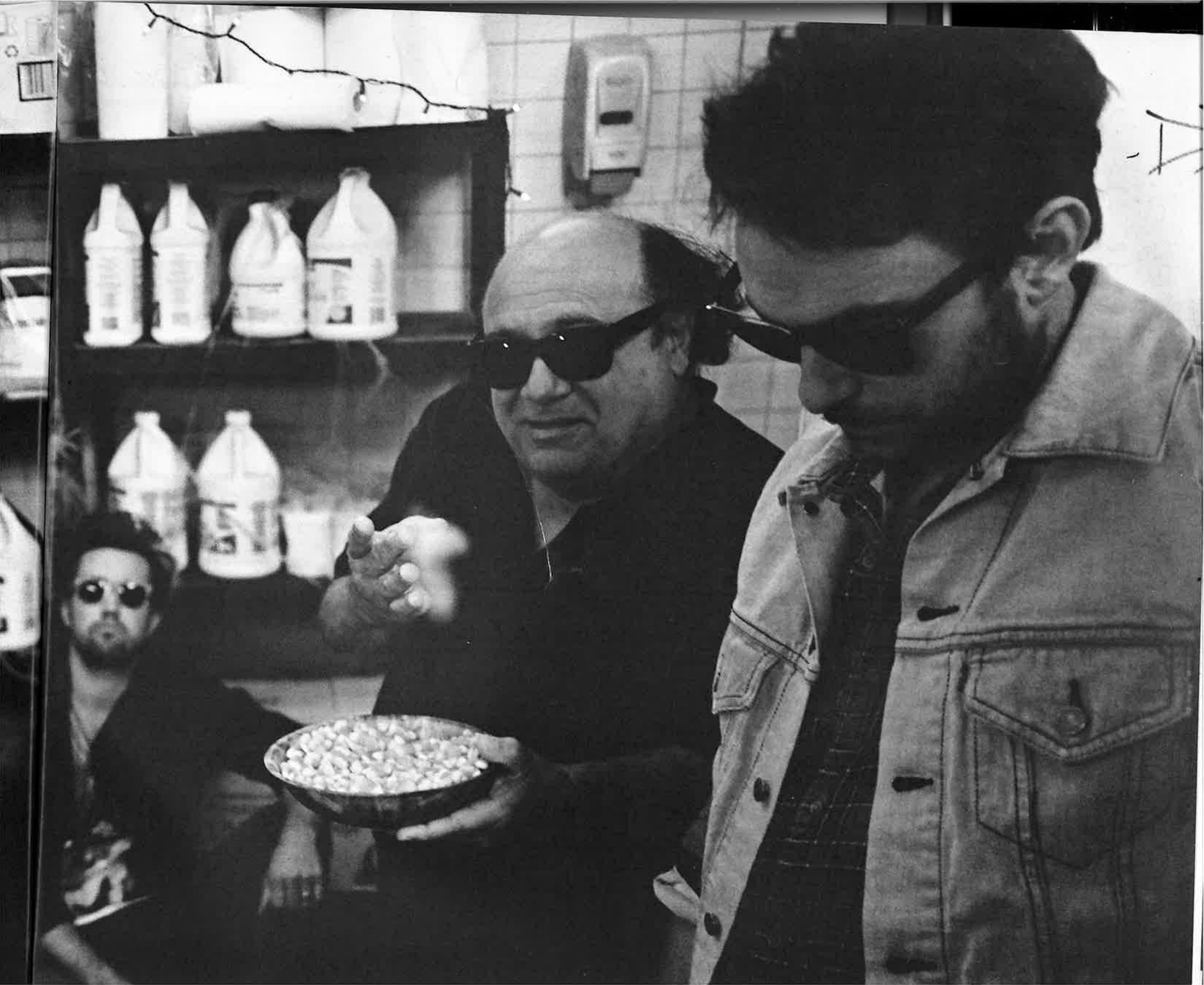
Homemade Hootenanny

For all its double-crossing and unruliness, an ironic notion runs through the very core of *Sunny*: Family comes first. The entire principal acting team works with their spouses or family in some on-set capacity. McElhenney and Olson eloped after meeting on the show, and McElhenney's photographer brother shoots for *Sunny* and other FX programs. Howerton wooed his wife, actress Jill Latiano, last season, while DeVito's daughter guest-starred on an episode. And though Day's puerile character eternally pines for the unresponsive Waitress (Mary Elizabeth Ellis), he married her in real life. "It's great working with our spouses," says Day. "I think someone that never works with their wife probably has a terrible one."

Even the slow-building buzz the show has garnered keeps it grounded in some type of reality. "I liked the fact that our show was this cultish, underground hit for awhile," Olson says. "We appreciated that kind of attention. Winning an award isn't going to make us feel better about the work that we're doing—this isn't a popularity contest."

Rather than luring viewers through snaky media glad-handing, the DIY-minded creators have turned to Twitter, blogs and viral videos to promote their show organically. Spoofs of *Friends*, Auto-Tune and rap songs joined last year's breakout "Nightman Cometh" tour and have given the show a huge ratings boost. "Doing ["Nightman"] was a great way to interact with our fans," Day says. "Our fans are smart and savvy television watchers." As such, The Gang plans to hit the road again as soon as possible.

However, in these times of instant access where the barrier between actor and audience is often removed, the foils of success and stardom can affect an artist's livelihood. *Sunny*, a show that has spread largely through word-of-mouth and the



Internet, now must deal with the issue of illegal downloading, often regarded as a dilemma faced solely by the music industry. "We've been given a chance from our network to slowly grow," says Howerton, "and I think that happens a lot with indie bands and small music labels. The voracity of our fans is apparent and many of them started watching it on Hulu." McElhenney takes a stronger stance: "Once you click to download that file, you're stealing. Arguing that it's the nature of the culture you're in, well, that's just bullshit."

As any indie rock band will tell you, lean times often result in requiring big ad placements to fiscally move forward, and *Sunny* is no different. Last season's third episode, "The Great Recession," integrated marketing funds from Dave & Buster's restaurants and Coors Light. Some fans threw up their hands in protest and filled chat rooms with dismayed snark, but McElhenney dispels any rumors of selling out. "We integrated the products into the show seamlessly, but we did not know they were going to air commercials for both products during the airtime." The Gang still stands by its decision and only regrets the unforeseen outcomes.

We're Comin' Out

The music of *Sunny* mirrors a cast of characters who enjoy pop culture's outmoded ironies. The show's loping muzak theme, Heinz Kiessling's "Temptation Sensation," captures a feeling as annoyingly familiar as seeing your neighborhood barstool baron perched in the same spot for 25 years. "We wanted all the characters to be somewhat desperate, so they listen to old '80s and '90s hits," says McElhenney. "They're the kind of people that never stopped listening to the stuff they grew up on." Thus, songs by Rick Astley, Biz Markie, Steve Winwood, and Whitesnake are often heard blasting from Paddy's jukebox. Not to be outdone, DeVito—a music hound in real life—uses tunes to help him sketch out his "organic" portrayal of Frank.

"Frank was raised on the outskirts of Pennsylvania and New Jersey by a very poor family," DeVito says in a serious tone. "The Gang doesn't know that Frank is a music aficionado, but Charlie and Frank listen to jazz once in awhile. We turn on a radio if we get one working. Most of our shit's broken, though."

As DeVito's method acting can attest, it's obvious that *Sunny* takes itself seriously. The Gang even has some resolutions planned. "We'll know when it's going to be our last season, so we'll be able to plan for that," says Olson. "A lot of shows don't have that luxury because they get canceled. We've tossed around some ideas about how to end it. All are very funny, but I'm not going to tell you anything."

Before any farewells are given, this fall's Season 6 guarantees more hilarity. The cast hints at the return of fan favorites like the incestuous McPoyles, Rickety Cricket (played by writer David Hornsby), the Lawyer (Brian Unger), and Carmen (Brittany Daniel); guests include comedian Dave Foley, *SNL* alumnus Jason Sudeikis and Tom Sizemore. Plotlines are under wraps, but a Halloween episode, gay marriage and a *Die Hard* parody are all on tap. And even though most TV comedies take the opposite route, Olson's pregnancy won't be hidden. "Ultimately, we realized we were never going to be able to realistically hide it by midseason," McEllhenney says. "We knew we had to embrace it and put it into the show."

Naturally, The Gang also wants to eventually set their sights on more projects. One long-gestating venture is a *Star Trek* parody called *Boldly Going Nowhere*, starring Hornsby as Rickety Cricket. However, the attention required to produce *Sunny* precludes anything beyond an idea. "It's really hard for us to devote the time needed to make another show," says McElhenney. "If we spent the time it takes to make *Boldly Going Nowhere* a fantastic show, we would be neglecting *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. That isn't fair to us or the fans."

Let It Be

Although it's clear that a juggernaut like *Sunny* requires non-stop attention, planning and focus, let it never be overlooked that at the heart of it all remains a crew of hilarious people determined to make each other laugh. One "lost" episode of the new season, entitled "Trivia Night" but tenderly dubbed "The Gang Bang Theory," proves the comedic minds of *Sunny* never stop. The April Fools' joke script came in response to a Tequila-fueled prank DeVito pulled during a 2009 Television Critics Association event in Washington, D.C.

"I told the bellhop at the front of the hotel to show Rob, Charlie, Glenn, Kaitlin and Mary Elizabeth to their room," says DeVito. "We picked out this really small room with one bed; I told him to put a cot in there so he could say he accommodated them. They were nice about it, but kept asking, 'This is what FX got us?'" DeVito laughs. "I finally jumped out of the closet and they lost their shit."

RCG retaliated with the mother of all pranks. DeVito was told one morning that the script they were reading was changed because of a location problem. "It's all about a contest, so Frank gets a hooker to run it," says DeVito. "She gets in the car and it's a sting and I go to jail." DeVito discovered that the whole script—admittedly "well-written," he says—was essentially his character being brutally raped in prison while the rest of The Gang put on a game show at Paddy's. By the end, Frank has an ice bag on his ass when his bail is up, only to be savagely raped by the prison guard, who grins, "April Fools, bitch!" Through giggles, DeVito lays down a *Sunny*-worthy punchline: "I always tell them to push the envelope, but I didn't say anything about stretching my asshole!"

So it remains that the handful of friends has their match—and, in DeVito's case, their ice. "Whether it's a theater production, a film or TV show, there's a family element," DeVito says. "But even if it's creatively rewarding you can still hate the people you're working with. It's great to come to work here—it doesn't feel like work." Like any family, The Gang builds their inane, insular world with unparalleled volatility and loyalty, creating a home for all us grinning idiots as we run to join them in the madness.

It's Always Indie

Sunny's Influence in the Music Community

The Boxer Rebellion's Adam Harrison:

I think it's set apart by its range. It's very rare that every element of a comedy is top draw, but *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* seems to tick every box—great writing, split-second timing, a fantastic support cast, huge characters and sharp social commentary.

Kings of Leon's Nathan Followill:

It's such a funny and natural show. I think that's what helps them out. I met Charlie and Glenn after a show in L.A. Glenn's a horrible ping-pong player, so that helped our friendship. When we're in the same town together we'll definitely make it a point to go out for dinner or drinks, which usually just means drinks. I haven't hung out with Rob, but Charlie and Glenn are absolutely hilarious, so I can only imagine he's just as funny.

Mike Patton:

I first heard about the show from Danny DeVito. He told me the story about the three guys that created it from nothing and got a deal. He was so into the fact that they did it in a grassroots/renegade way. So, Danny joined the show and I started watching. I was surprised by how subversive it is.

Danny is a great friend, as is his family. His son turned him onto my music, Fantômas in particular. Instead of telling his son to "turn that damn loud music off," he took the time to check it out. Over the years we have stayed in touch; two of his kids have worked for our label, Ipecac Recordings. They created their show from the ground up and have say and control over how the show looks and feels. That is the very reason we started our record label.

Of Montreal's Davey Pierce:

The fact that it really is about five people I would never want to be anywhere near sets it apart. It seems like most shows try to make the characters flawed but with some sort of overall redeeming quality, so at the end of each episode you can say things like, "Wow, I can see why everyone loves Raymond." *Sunny* doesn't seem to bother with that part. Every character is so self-centered and arrogant and they make no apologies for it. They just keep getting worse and worse and you wind up loving them for it somehow...

Playing "Dayman" in 2008 at Philadelphia's Electric Factory was actually one of my favorite tour memories. We weren't sure how it would go over, but we just kind of decided to say "fuck it" and go for it. It was pretty awesome to be in a Superman outfit in front of 1,500 people leading them in the chorus. We haven't done it since, but I can't really see the point. It was just one of those moments you should never try to duplicate because it will only suck compared to that first time.

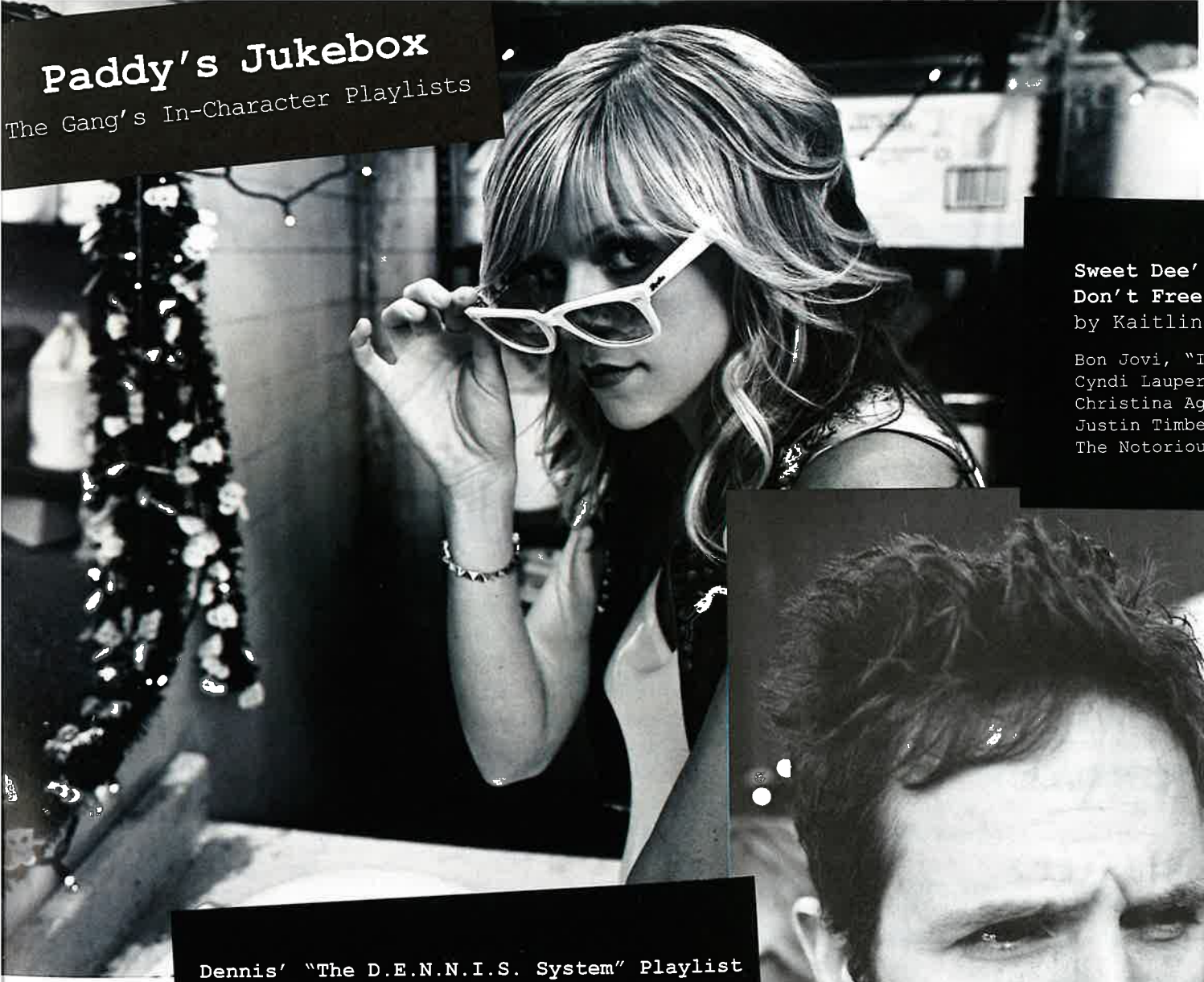
Yoni Wolf of WHY?

I watched six episodes from Season 1 the night before Glenn hit me up on MySpace. We did some promo videos [for WHY?'s *Alopecia*] that Glenn and his wife were in. I really connect with the writers' sense of humor. Though it's hard to pick a favorite character, I really like Dennis with stuff like The D.E.N.N.I.S. System. He's such a twisted dude, yet I honestly relate to him, which is hard to admit. I texted Glenn earlier this year because I realized I was trying to D.E.N.N.I.S. my ex-girlfriend. He's like, "What's sick about this system is that it actually does work." I'm waiting to get my walk-on for the show. Glenn also persuaded me to shave my torso. I will never do that again!

MAKEUP: LEAH VAUTROT HAIR: SUSANNA KONTONICKAS WARDROBE: MELIS KURIS

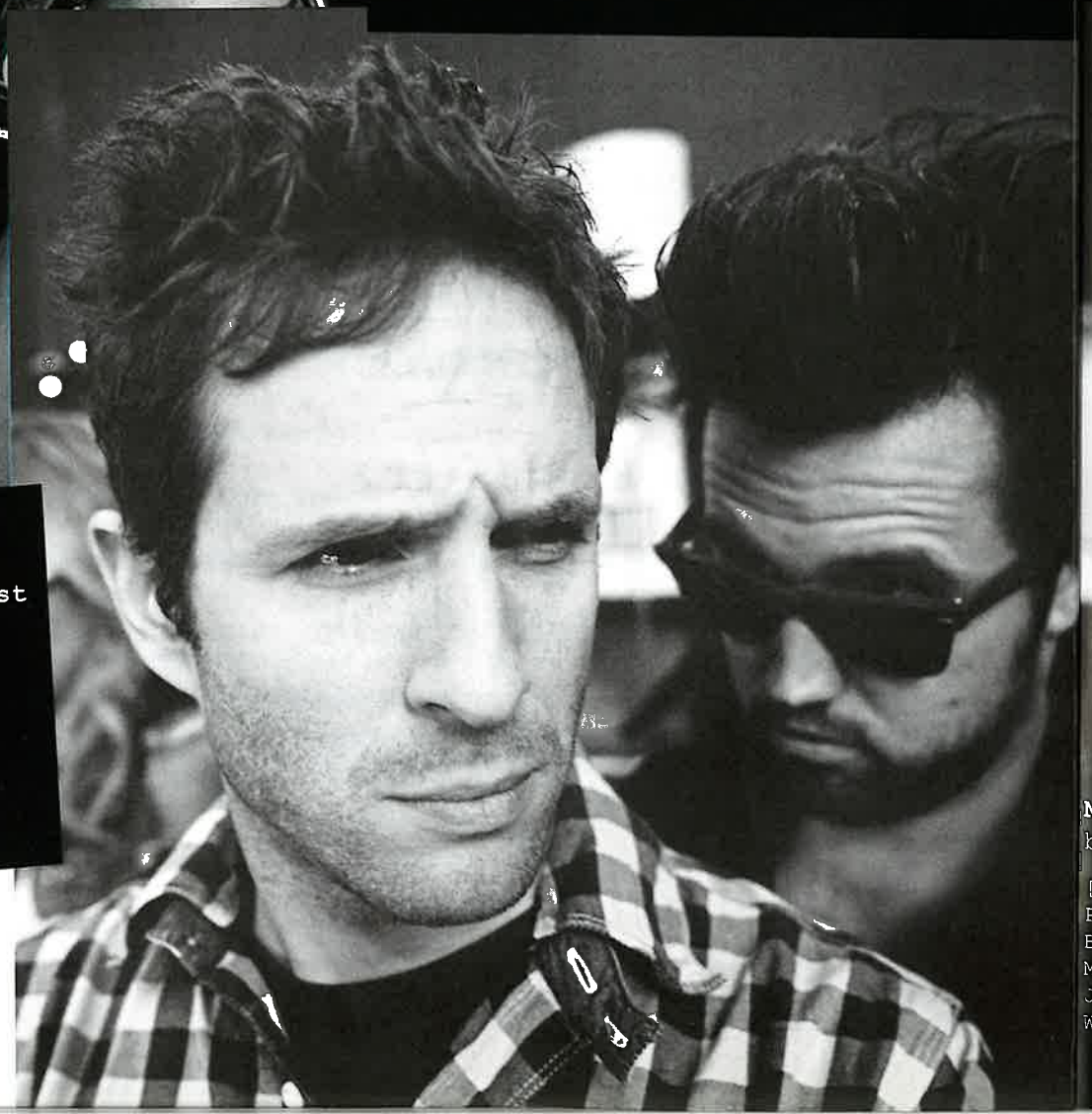
Paddy's Jukebox

The Gang's In-Character Playlists



Sweet Dee's "Inspirational, Don't Freeze Up" Playlist
by Kaitlin Olson

Bon Jovi, "I'll Be There for You"
Cyndi Lauper, "Time After Time"
Christina Aguilera, "Beautiful"
Justin Timberlake, "SexyBack"
The Notorious B.I.G., "Mo Money, Mo Problems"



Dennis' "The D.E.N.N.I.S. System" Playlist
by Glenn Howerton

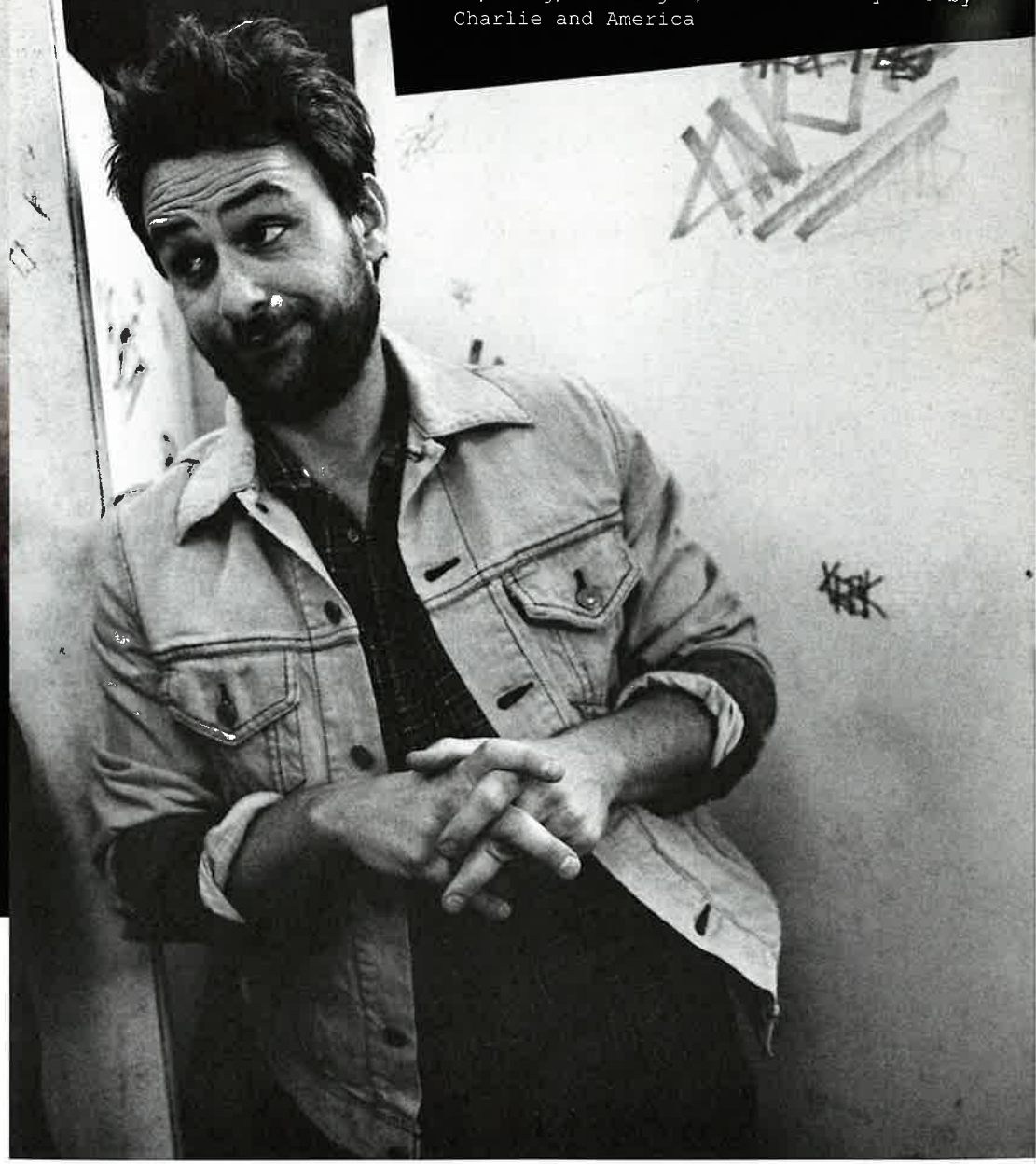
a-ha, "Take On Me"
Sade, "Hang On to Your Love"
Steve Winwood, "Higher Love"
Rick Astley, "Never Gonna Give You Up"
Rick Astley, "Together Forever"

Frank's "Trippin' Balls" Playlist
by Danny DeVito

Frank Sinatra, "The Best is Yet to Come"
Bob Dylan, "Positively 4th Street"
Etta James, "At Last"
Bruce Springsteen, "Mansion on the Hill"
Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong,
"Let's Call the Whole Thing Off"

Charlie's "Bird Law" Playlist
by Charlie Day

"Nightman," music and lyrics by Charlie Kelly
"Dayman," by Charlie and Dennis Reynolds
"Tiny Boy, Baby Boy," by Charlie, additional and unintentional lyrics by Sweet Dee
"Birds of War," music and lyrics by Charlie, Dennis, and their friend, a guy named Mac
"Rock, Flag, and Eagle," music and lyrics by Charlie and America



Mac's "Project Badass" Playlist
by Rob McElhenney

[Basically, the *Road House* soundtrack.]
Patrick Swayze, "Cliff's Edge"
Bill Payne, "Rad Gumbo"
Maria McKee, "A Good Heart"
Jim Morrison, "Roadhouse Blues"
Willie Nile, "Raising Heaven (in Hell Tonight)"